

ETHICAL CASE STUDY: Blogger Identity Crisis

Kim had just finished presenting her public relations strategy to her newest client, Carl Jenkins, of Jenkins Wireless. He seemed thrilled and complimented her for her clever ideas of helping his company make a name for itself in the competitive high tech market. But he felt they could make better use of high tech blogs.

“I visit them weekly,” Carl informed her, “and I see a lot of online conversations about new products. Sometimes I join in and mention my products just so we don’t get left out. But I don’t have time to post all the time, so I was hoping you guys could incorporate some weekly posts on these blogs.”

“Sure, we can add that component to help you to create a buzz for Jenkins on these key sites,” Kim replied as she took note of the new idea.

“Great,” Carl laughed. “I waste so much time trying to come up with ambiguous online names that don’t let people know I work for Jenkins.”

Kim set down her pen and showed a look of concern. “Well, actually, Carl, we will have to let people know we are working on your behalf when we post online.” She said.

“What good is that?” Carl questioned. “If they know who we are, they won’t listen because it’s no better than an advertisement.”

“Well, your name is still getting out there, and we can use it as a starting point to get unsolicited testimonials for your products,” Kim replied.

“I think our products are top notch, of course. So I’m not lying in my postings,” He smiled. “But there’s always a chance that someone chooses to slam us and then other bloggers won’t care what our reply is because we work for the company and seem less candid.”

“You can use this information to help improve your products so that very few people will ever have anything bad to say,” Kim said. “Besides, people will give your company credit for being honest about who you are when posting. That adds to your credibility.”

“True, but I don’t know if that outweighs the benefits of our advice appearing unsolicited. Besides, no one will even reply to a solicited posting,” Carl replied, still skeptical. “After all, you know tons of my competitors are surely posting anonymously, and it’s only fair to compete on the same ground. Heck, the guy who badmouths our company’s products online is probably not who he says he is. He’s probably a competitor in disguise! We have to be able to defend ourselves and compete head to head in this new public arena. Besides, you know we give a much higher percentage of our profits to charity than our competitors and we are a greener company, so when we do well, others do too. You emphasize that in our PR campaign.” He paused and continued. “If your agency doesn’t feel comfortable doing this portion of the campaign, then perhaps I could just get one of my employees to do the blog stuff. Or maybe we could give discounts or prizes to customers willing to post real testimonials.”

Put yourself in the position of Kim, the PR Agency rep. What decision should she make?